

family

A D V O C A C Y

It's a numbers game

Meg Sweeney

This paper could have also been called *The More the Merrier* or *Come One, Come All*, as I believe the number of typical people we encounter in our lives enhances the opportunity for relationships, commitment and even love to develop.

I am sharing the very personal story of my family that comprises my three children – Daniel, Joscelyn and Monica and my husband Todd. Todd and I have been totally committed to making decisions together in relation to our family.

When Joscelyn was born, we knew that life was going to be tough for her. We were being told by various professionals and well-meaning people what Jos needed. I was also on a personal search for information. I devoured journals, attended workshops and conferences and accosted many individuals with endless questions about why everyone thought life should be so different for my daughter than for my son.

This search was the foundation of our own personal numbers game. Being a very small family, I decided we were too vulnerable and needed more allies, hence the arrival of Monica, our third child. I was extraordinarily lucky that my search led me to excellent events and people who gave me confidence and faith in my daughter's future.

I learned that not only are there barriers in Joscelyn's life due to her own personal manifestations of intellectual disability but also due to the centuries of baggage that each one of us carries around with us in relation to people with disability, subsequent fear and lack of expectations.

At one event I attended, there was an overhead that outlined the things that vulnerable people need protection from or advancement in. I loved the way the points were all interconnected but what spoke to me was the second point – "Sense of personal security, acceptance, love, belonging." This overhead became our family compass. Someone was talking my language at last.

Relationships were the most important thing that Joscelyn needed and this became the focus for all decision making from that time on.

Our family was the obvious place to start. Love them or loathe them, our families are the backbone of our lives and taking the time to make these relationships as right as they can be is worthwhile although it can be emotionally draining.

We shared our vision constantly through demonstration of our love and respect. Social events and gatherings became very important. We made contact with any distant family and let them know how valuable all our children are. We have also paid particular attention to our children's relationship with each other.

I have been conscious of helping to develop collective and individual relationships between our children. Our mantra as a family is that home must be our sanctuary – the place where we all can relax and do not need to be on guard.

This has given Jos a strong foundation of self-worth and identity to take into the world.

Outside our family is where the numbers of people really come into play. We have always chosen 'regular' everything – simply because that is where everyone else is.

Our kids have always attended preschool and school together, in regular class, enhancing and embedding Joscelyn's belonging, acceptance and identity.

All our kids now attend our local State high school. There are about 1200 students and 80 adults. Being part of such a large crowd reduces the intense pressure and constant scrutiny that Joscelyn can experience.

Joscelyn has developed wonderful relationships with the friends of her brother and sister. She has developed a large informal group of acquaintances and a small group of close friends. By the time Joscelyn leaves high school she will have encountered over 2000 young people and 150 adults. This has been a massive opportunity for Jos to know people and for people to know her.

Because of our small family, we have to create the relationships that others may typically have through family. Our neighbours and friends are very important to us. Our family is a

very welcoming neighbour, helping where we can with babysitting, tool lending etc. This has led to numerous casual friendships where all our children are known and Joscelyn enjoys support or assistance if other family members are not around.

It has also led to a number of close and ongoing relationships with families still in the street and other families who have moved away.

Like most families, we have facilitated birthday parties and out of school get - togethers. We encourage other kids to come on our family outings and host billets when out of town students need somewhere to stay. We have also embraced opportunities – like securing a personal trainer to develop Joscelyn’s swimming skills rather than accepting a segregated swimming class – an option that did not fit comfortably with our compass. The personal trainer is slightly older than Joscelyn and a valued member of their school community. This relationship affords Joscelyn the opportunity for other connections.

Joselyn also has friendships with kids she has known since infants. In order to find these few gems, Jos has been right ‘out there’ amongst it with her peers.

Friendship is a two way street. Not a lot of people will embrace Joscelyn’s friendship and she often rejects the offers of friendship from others. Friendship cannot be purchased, arranged, brokered or organised. Friendship, love and enduring affection is a gift that we give each other freely.

The more typical, valued, roles Joscelyn has, where everyone else is and the more people she meets, the more opportunities there will be for relationships to form.

It is the layers of Joscelyn’s relationships, so delicately interwoven, that create a web of support, invisible to the casual observer, that provides her with personal security, acceptance, love and belonging that I hoped for when she was a baby. Our journey as a family is just under 16 years along, however, with our compass, distance already travelled in the direction we anticipate and increasing numbers of fellow travellers – the horizon looks good for fair sailing.

Family Advocacy owns the copyright in the material contained in this document except where prior authorship is acknowledged. You may not use the material for commercial purposes without Family Advocacy’s permission. www.family-advocacy.com